Gilbert K. Chesterton's London Letter

Woman, War and Exile

IN the debate about the political position of women, it was urged by one side that woman would naturally strengthen the hopes of peace, and by the other that she might, for that very reason, weaken the national effort in war. The one defect in both these arguments concerned the mere detail of truth.

It was like discussing whether the fact that a woman has wings will be convenient for carrying the mails, or inconvenient through taking up room in the tram cars.

It is not the fact that a woman hates war any more than a man when he is not a maniac. It might well be maintained that the difference is the other way; that feminine feeling in bulk is much more likely to be wildly Jingo than wisely or unwisely Pacifist. The intellectuals miss this by merely thinking of their ideal woman; and not of any real charwoman or gentlewoman or needlewoman they have really met.

A Poet Touched With Genius.

There are exceptions; and I think they are exceptions that prove the rule. I happen to have before me the example of a justly admired and widely lamented lady poet, only lately dead; a poet who, if not a Pacifist, was evidently chiefly impressed, and even overpowered, by the negative or nihilistic side of war.

I call her an exception because her last beautiful book of poems has nowhere the merely military note common in women's war poetry; its tone is summed up in its title of *The Sad Years* (Poems by Dora Sigerson. New York: George H. Doran Company). And I say that she proves the rule because those years were really made sad to her, not through the failure of an international but a national, indeed a nationalist ideal. The flags and frontiers troubled her, not because she was a cosmopolitan, which means little better than a globetrotter, but because she was an exile. Her poems are not those of a Pacifist, or even of a Sinn Feiner, but simply of an Irishwoman in England.

The Fantastic Made Reasonable.

Dora Sigerson, well known in private life as Mrs. Clement Shorter, was undoubtedly one of the most genuine women of genius of our time. In almost every poem in this book can be found one of those effects, however quiet or even faint, that betray real force in poetry.

Genius is present when a poet attempts something just beyond the range of reason, and makes it reasonable. It may be in a mere detail of description, as in this line about the pattering of a shower:

"The kind little feet of the rain ran by my side."

It may be the direct paradox which belongs to the very bewilderment of bereavement:

"I want thy strength to hold and comfort me
For all the grief I had in losing thee."

The conception of *The Tree Uprooted*, which imagines it as dying in the desire to be a moving or even a flying thing, is impressive in itself; and especially since it not only strikes the keynote, but gives the key word in the word "exile." So it would seem as if her own nature tore up its English roots and died.

Poetry, Philosophy and Old Proverbs.

It would be absurd to judge poetry so true to the emotions of the exile by the necessary opinions of the citizen. Nevertheless where there really is poetry there is always philosophy; and unfortunately there is not always good philosophy where there is good poetry.

Stray suggestions carrying the weight of imagination must almost be met like arguments; and one or two of Dora Sigerson's may be used as arguments on the wrong side. For instance, the last lines called *An Old Proverb*, which apply to the war the words: "It will all be the same in a thousand years," are often reproduced more prosaically as a pacifist thesis.

But it is a very untenable thesis. Old proverbs, indeed, are generally true; but, like old superstitions, they are only true when taken lightly.

Things That Matter a Thousand Years After.

The common form is "all the same a hundred years hence"; and of nearly all our fads and fashions it is strictly correct. Indeed, most of the things that worry us will have vanished in ten years, and many in ten minutes. But if there is one thing of which this is emphatically not true, it is the great wars of history. They have not become matters of indifference in a thousand years, or in two thousand, or in three thousand.

It is not true that it matters nothing to us now whether the Greeks or Persians won at Marathon. We might as well say it matters nothing to a man at the age of 60 whether he was drowned at the age of 6.

It is not true that it mattered nothing to the people of Berkshire in the nineteenth century whether the Danes conquered Wessex in the ninth century. An Irishman might as well say it would not matter to Ireland in the nineteenth century whether she had been sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic in the ninth.

It is not true that we have now no interest in the Israelites having beaten the Canaanites, in the Romans having beaten the Carthaginians, in Aëtius having beaten Attila.

There is not a white man alive who has not every private and practical reason to thank God, night and day, for each of these battles, as for a personal escape from a precipice or a dose of poison. When, therefore, the poet writes:

"And in a thousand years
It will be all the same.
Which of us was to blame?
What will it matter then?"

the mood is hardly worthy of the mind. But the paradox is that the mood itself is really embittered, not by pacifism, but by patriotism; the patriotism of the exile.

These Were Fates for Ireland.

Nor do I believe for a moment that Dora Sigerson would have affected such detachment about the just wars of her own people; or that she thought being true to Ireland or treacherous to Ireland would be all the same in a thousand years.

Nothing will persuade me that she thought it would ever cease to matter whether Emmet or Castlereagh was to blame, or even whether Parnell or Piggott was to blame. And her own country is a solid example of the truth; for only by holding to the tradition of Emmet and the tenacity of Parnell has Ireland now become something happier than she could possibly have been if her sons had all been non-resisters.

The Forgetfulness of Hell.

It was the English tyrant who was always telling the Irish patriot to forget. For the tyrant always has a touch of the barbarian, and the soul of barbarism is oblivion.

What makes the Prussian policy ultimately atheist is its conception that the universe has no memory. It assumes that things need never be forgiven because they will always be forgotten.

The cloven hoof will leave no footprint on the sands of time; for the shore is a shapeless slime washed forever by a slimy wave. Sad fancies may flutter pardonably enough over a river of forgetness——

But in this matter the truth remains that Lethe is a river in Hell; and it is blacker than Styx.

G. K. CHESTERTON.

Mere Mignolle

By Harold Willard Gleason.

Mere Mignolle,
Wrinkled and grayed,
In the shade
The great Arch made,
Sold to all
Little knots of flowers gay,
Symbols of a happier day;
Lilies, violets and roses,
Hyacinths—bright, cheerful posies:

* "Pour deux sous il peut choisir
Le bouquet monsieur desire."

Mere Mignolle,
Bent, ill fed,
Three sons dead,
Sold, for bread,
Flowers to all.

Then one day
Through the rain
Came a train
Filled with pain
On its way
From the front, the ambulances.
Mere Mignolle's all seeing glances
Note the lads from o'er the sea,
Wounded for her "cher pays"—
Straightway with her knotted hands
Full of nosegays sweet she stands:
Gives them all.

† "Vie est courte—
Je suis forte!
Soupe? Qu' importe!"
Shrugged Mere Mignolle.

Faces brighten;
Pain loads lighten;
Spirits heighten,
And they all,
From the ambulances slow,
Wounded soldiers, as they go
Cheer for Mere Mignolle.

* "For two cents the gentleman may choose the bunch he wishes."

† "Life is short. I am strong. Food? What does that matter to me!"

A Conscientious Objector

By H. A. Powell.

It ain't that I want exemption, for fightin' is my gait;
I did my bit in the Moro scrap way back in '98.
But I hate to be caught in this latest draft—I'll tell the whole world fair,
That my principal objection is that kid o' mine over there.

I'll look right well in a private's suit with my hand against my brow,
Salutin' this tow-head youngster who's a capt'n or somethin' now.
I'm eager and willin' to do my share like any red-blooded Yank,
But I hate to be led to the firin' line by a kid that I used to spank.

His mother will laugh when the boy writes home how his much esteemed old man
Is doin' police in the kitchen; in other words, "shinin' the pan,"
While this fair-haired son of a fightin' dad is conferrin' with Pershing now
And figurin' out the next big move in this anti-Prussian row.

Of course I'll admit that this boy o' mine is some unusual youth,
Brighter I think than the run of boys—if you make me tell the truth.
But it don't seem right in this kind of fight that a dad who taught his kid
The principal points of millin' should abide by that youngster's bid.

I'm willing to go and I'm on my way, for I'm not quite 45;
I'll humble my pride for a year or two till we skin those Huns alive;
But when I get back to Three Forks—and this is a promise true—
I'll "captain" that kid I'm salutin' now till he's red and white and blue.

O Sister Nations! America to the Allies——1917

By Harvey Wickham.

O sister nations, I have slept.
Why turn your faces, pained and cold?
I dreamed of some great tryst we kept,
With songs and garlands manifold.

But these be maimed, and those be dead!
Dark monsters glide throughout the sea.
And all your rivers run with red
While nameless horrors stare at me.

Whole villages beneath the chain,
And in each chamber some foul deed;
Cathedrals torn, and women slain.
O God! I slept while ye had need.

I waken slowly. Through the mist
I see my banners soiled and torn,
Yet not with battle. I have kissed—
'Twas Judas! Now I mourn, I mourn.

Ye thought I loved but this, my gold?
Nay, take it then in simple fee;
Spend, spend in million millionfold.
Not so—and still ye turn from me!

My blood, then. Every drop shall flow.
When have I grudged my love? Ye fight
For Liberty—I did not know.
Forgive my blindness of the night.

At last ye smile. My banners soar
With yours, by no foe overawed.
That glorious shout: "Once more, once more!
Columbia draws the sword of God!"